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SUDAN LETS U.S. FLY 800 ETHIOPIA JEWS TO ISRAELI REFUGE

SECRET 3-DAY OPERATION

Evacuation of Last Refugees Was Arranged by Bush in Meeting With Nimeiry

By **BERNARD GWERTZMAN**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 23 — The United States, in a secret operation, today completed the evacuation of virtually all the Ethiopian Jews who were left in the Sudan after an Israeli-sponsored airlift was halted, Administration officials said.

The operation was directed by the Central Intelligence Agency, and involved the State Department and the Air Force, the sources said. In a three-day period, 800 people were flown by C-130 Hercules transports to Israel, the officials said.

Because of the sensitivity of the issue, the United States Government would not officially comment. There was also no official word from Israel.

Reporter in the Sudan

According to United Press International, President Reagan was asked about the matter today as he and his wife, Nancy, were greeting children involved in the Special Olympics for the disabled. Mrs. Reagan looked at him and whispered, "I don't know." He then told reporters, "No comment."

Information was gained from several officials aware of the airlift who spoke on condition that there would be no attribution to them or their agency.

The operation was first disclosed by The Los Angeles Times, whose reporter was in the Sudan. As a result of that account, people who might not otherwise have spoken were willing to provide additional information.

They said the plan had been worked out when Vice President Bush met with President Gaafar al-Nimeiry of the Sudan this month. Mr. Nimeiry agreed, as long as the Jews were not evacuated by Israeli planes.

Nimeiry Coming to the U.S.

The Sudan, which has dire economic problems, has already received nearly 400,000 refugees from the famine in Ethiopia, including 8,000 Jews.

Mr. Nimeiry has relied on American military and economic aid, even though much of the aid has been held up until the Sudan carries out needed economic changes.

It was announced today that he is scheduled to come to the United States and will see President Reagan at the White House on April 1.

"It was obviously convenient for Nimeiry to win some points on the Falashas," an official said. Ethiopian Jews are sometimes called Falashas, an Amharic word for "stranger" that they find derogatory.

State Department officials said they did not believe that Mr. Nimeiry's visit was conditional on his cooperation in the airlift. They said he had been scheduled to visit earlier this month, but the date was postponed because of Mr. Bush's trip to the Sudan.

When the Vice President returned last weekend, he urged President Reagan to approve the plans for the evacuation, the sources said.

Mr. Reagan agreed early in the week, they said. After 8,000 Jews had turned up in Sudanese refugee camps last year as part of the exodus from Ethiopia, Israel worked quietly through a Belgian charter company, Trans European Airways, to evacuate 7,000 to Israel through various Western European cities.

There are believed to be 10,000 Jews still in Ethiopia or among the 3,000 refugees a day who continue to make their way into the Sudan.

Much of the cost of the Israeli-sponsored airlift was paid for out of the \$15 million in resettlement aid and \$5 million in transportation aid given to Israel by the United States in the 1985 fiscal year budget.

Airlift Was Canceled in January

When reports about the airlift began to appear in early January, the Sudan canceled the operation. Some people accused the Sudan of reacting to criticism voiced in Ethiopia and other countries that the Sudanese were abetting the Israelis. About 1,000 Jews were left behind. Administration officials said today that about 200 of them managed to leave the Sudan on their own, leaving the 800 who have now been evacuated by the United States.

The Sudan is among the Arab countries who are still in a formal state of war with Israel. Mr. Nimeiry said in an interview after he had canceled the Israeli-sponsored airlift that he would let any country take refugees out so long as they did not go to Israel.

In the American operation, 16 planes were initially selected, but after C.I.A. agents reported on the actual number to be evacuated, the number of planes was reduced to six.

The American planes that picked up the Jews in the Sudan were among those that were being used to deliver food to the refugee camps.

The first day some 200 people were flown to Israel, the second day 461, and by the time the operation was concluded, 160 to 200 were expected to leave, making a total of about 800. The planes reportedly used an airstrip near Gedaref, no far from a refugee camp.

To meet the Sudanese insistence that the refugees not go directly to Israel, they were given visas with European destinations. But the planes apparently flew directly to Rimón Air Force Base in Israel.

The United States decided to undertake the airlift, sources said, because no other country acceptable to the Sudan was willing to do so and because of a desire to aid the Ethiopian Jews and meet Israel's request for help. The operation was financed through C.I.A. money and refugee funds, which also paid for the food airlift to the Sudan.

The sources said that they had hoped that secrecy could have been maintained to limit any embarrassment to Mr. Nimeiry. But they said that once the planes began landing and taking on the refugees, it became difficult to hide the operation.